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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Terry Goddard Announces Take-Down Of Billion-Dollar Drug-Trafficking Organization

Task force busts cartel that smuggled two million pounds of marijuana into U.S.

(Phoenix, Ariz. – Dec. 23, 2008) Attorney General Terry Goddard today announced the break-up of the Garibaldi-Lopez Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO), a bi-national syndicate believed to have smuggled up to 400,000 pounds of marijuana annually from Mexico into the United States since 2003.

Fifty-nine individuals were indicted Monday and 39 arrested on felony charges relating to drug trafficking as a result of "Operation Tumbleweed." This year-long investigation was conducted by a task force comprised of the Phoenix Police Department, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Department of Public Safety (DPS), Border Patrol, Attorney General's Office, Customs Border Protection Air and Marine and the Pinal County Sheriff's Office.

The investigation, indictments and arrests constitute one of the largest take-downs of a drug-smuggling organization in Arizona history in terms of the volume of drugs and scope of operations. The total of up to two million pounds of marijuana that the Garibaldi-Lopez DTO transported from Mexico to stash houses in Phoenix was ultimately sold across the U.S. It carried a wholesale bulk value estimated to be \$1 billion.

"Operation Tumbleweed is an historic achievement in the fight against violent border smuggling syndicates," Goddard said. "Trafficking across our southern border is *the* organized crime threat of the 21st century. To secure our border and protect our communities, law enforcement must work together, such as we did here, to go after the head of the monster. I will continue to partner with law enforcement at all levels to choke off the cartels' fund sources, attack their smuggling routes and dismantle their organizations from the top down for as long as it takes to rid Arizona of this scourge."

"As a result of operations like this one, crime in Phoenix is down across the board," said Mayor Phil Gordon. "By going after sophisticated criminal syndicates, starting at the very top, we are making our community safer. And by keeping haystacks of marijuana off our streets, we are protecting the vulnerable targets of these criminals, our kids."

According to investigators, the Garibaldi-Lopez DTO has transported huge volumes of marijuana across the border using vehicles stolen from the U.S. Each stolen vehicle was modified to carry 2,000 to 2,500 pounds of bundled marijuana at a time.

Between one and four of these "load vehicles" was used for each cross-border shipment, and the DTO ran approximately one shipment per week.

"The drug cartels are learning the hard way that it is no longer business as usual in Arizona," said Matthew Allen, special agent in charge of the Arizona ICE Office of Investigations. "These arrests represent a severe disruption of the Sinaloa drug cartel's ability to smuggle marijuana into Phoenix for distribution across the country."

"Drug trafficking organizations like this are responsible for bringing violence to the streets of our community," said Phoenix Police Department Assistant Chief Andy Anderson. "This organization was highly sophisticated and utilized advanced techniques, but, through cooperative law enforcement efforts, we have dismantled it and brought these thugs to justice. Stopping violent crime committed by these types of organizations has and will always be a top priority for Chief Harris. We will continue to battle them on every level to dismantle, disrupt and eliminate their operations. Those individuals and organizations who feel they can use the streets of our community for a conduit of crime will be targeted and brought to justice."

Each shipment occurred in two stages. The first stage consisted of transporting the bulk marijuana from Mexico to Pinal County. The DTO allegedly loaded the vehicles in Sonoyta, Mexico, and crossed covertly into the U.S. through the desert of the Tohono O'Odham Nation's reservation. The movement of each load vehicle from Mexico to its final destination at a stash house in Phoenix involved no fewer than 20 people.

Pinal County Sheriff Chris Vasquez said, "Operation Tumbleweed is a great example of how Federal, State and local law enforcement can work together making our State and County a better place to live, work and raise our children. Operation Tumbleweed should send a strong message to the drug cartels that Pinal County is not the place to do business."

"Today, we have taken another important step in our fight against drug trafficking," said U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Special Agent in Charge Elizabeth W. Kempshall. "Operation Tumbleweed identified and dismantled a well-organized criminal operation responsible for smuggling and distributing multi-ton loads of marijuana into Southern Arizona and beyond. DEA shares with its federal and local law enforcement partners the goal of completely destroying this organization and any others like it."

Investigators describe the DTO's movement through the desert as methodical. The organization went to great lengths to remain undetected, driving load vehicles through dry washes and dirt roads in barren parts of the desert. Drivers were outfitted with night vision equipment to enable the vehicles to travel in the dark of night without any illumination. The load vehicles also carried tarps in the event they needed to stop and cover up so as not to be visible from the air. After being used, load vehicles were dumped in open areas of Pinal County's Hidden Valley.

The DTO also deployed scouts in the high ground of the U.S. desert to act as counter-surveillance against law enforcement. Scouts were outfitted with electronic equipment to communicate with the load trucks and would advise the load drivers when to move. The scouts

were deployed in the hills with scout coordinators dropping off food and supplies, enabling scouts to stay in place for as long as a week at a time.

Once in Pinal County, the bulk loads were broken down into smaller loads. The second phase of the shipment involved transporting the marijuana from Pinal County to the Phoenix metro area. This was done by a separate group of drivers using inconspicuous SUVs and pickup trucks.

Once the drivers from the second stage brought the marijuana to the Phoenix metro area, it was turned over to the first level of customers. These customers allegedly took their share to their respective stash houses. Throughout this operation, investigators took enforcement actions at numerous stash houses throughout the Phoenix metro area and Pinal County.

Payment for the marijuana was sent in bulk amounts by motor vehicle from the Phoenix area to Mexico. The load drivers from the first stage and the scouts from the desert would come to Phoenix to be paid, then return to Mexico in a shuttle bus to prepare for the next load. When loads were not being moved, the scouts stayed in a compound in Pinal County. This compound housed 10 to 15 scouts at a time awaiting deployment in the Estrella Mountains.

"When our Officers seize huge amounts of marijuana and other drugs along the highways every month, it's these cartels that are trying to move their product through the state. I'm very pleased DPS has played a role in taking down a major organized crime ring. It could not have happened without the continued cooperation between federal, state and local law enforcement," said Roger Vanderpool, Director of the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

Operation Tumbleweed began in January 2008 following separate investigations into the Garibaldi-Lopez organization by many of the agencies involved in today's announcement. The magnitude of this criminal syndicate required the eight agencies involved to assemble a task force of 85 agents to successfully dismantle it.

Raleigh Leonard, Assistant Chief Patrol Agent for the U.S. Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, said, "Interagency cooperation is a core element of the Border Patrol's enforcement strategy. Tucson Sector is proud of the success of Operation Tumbleweed and remains committed to future efforts in conjunction with our law enforcement partners across Arizona."

John Stonehouse, Tucson Air Branch Operations Officer for the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, said, "The utilization of aviation assets in this case proved to be instrumental due to the remoteness of the DTO's area of operation. To ensure the success of Operation Tumbleweed, CBP Air and Marine utilized assets and personnel from various Air Branches, including the Albuquerque Air Unit, Great Falls Air Branch, Jacksonville Air and Marine Branch, Phoenix Air Unit, and the Tucson Air Branch. The accomplishments of Operation Tumbleweed were a direct result of law enforcement agencies working together."

The investigation concluded with a roundup of 39 individuals and yesterday's indictment of 60 individuals. The serious felony charges against the defendants include transportation and possession of marijuana for sale, illegally conducting an enterprise, money laundering, conspiracy and misconduct involving weapons.

Operation Tumbleweed has also led to the seizure of 25,600 pounds of marijuana, one kilogram of cocaine, 11 pounds of methamphetamine, \$769,472 of U.S. currency, 28 vehicles and 25 firearms, along with the recovery of 14 stolen vehicles.

Today's announcement comes approximately one week after the release of the *2009 National Drug Threat Assessment* by the U.S. Department of Justice. This report identified "Mexican drug trafficking organizations [as] the greatest organized crime threat to the United States."

Goddard was joined for today's announcement by Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Special Agent in Charge Matthew Allen, Pinal County Sheriff Chris Vasquez, Phoenix Police Department Assistant Chief Andy Anderson, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Assistant Special Agent in Charge Douglas W. Coleman, U.S. Border Patrol Tucson Sector Division Assistant Chief Patrol Agent Raleigh Leonard, U.S. Customs Border Protection Air and Marine Tucson Air Branch Operation's Officer John Stonehouse, Jr. and Arizona Department of Public Safety Commander Brant Benham. Assistant Attorney General Paula Alleman is prosecuting this case.

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